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## John Pittard, DISAGREEMENT, DEFERENCE, AND RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT

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expect about the correctness of that conception. If we take Jeffrey's advice, won't we be "creat[ing] even more silos within philosophy of religion" (65)? Jeffrey thinks not. If the danger with silos is that they isolate us from one another, how much more isolating to converse with religious others without owning up to what either of us really believe, outside the philosophy room? Interreligious understanding seems likelier to come from a fusion of horizons than from an attempt to say as little as possible.

I concur with Jeffrey about this almost entirely. Almost. Reading the closing pages of this closely argued book, I found myself thinking of C.S. Lewis's famous image of different (Christian) traditions as rooms in a boarding house. The "mere Christianity" of his title he likened to the main hall, off which the rooms open. "But it is in the rooms," he writes, "not the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals." Sage words. And yet: there was a point too in his writing a book titled *Mere Christianity*. As there might be a point in books and articles about "mere theism." If it can be clarifying and instructive for believers to explore the ways in which they are different, it can be equally clarifying and instructive for them to explore the ways in which they are the same.

Jeffrey has done her peers a service in writing this book, which must have been demanding to compose. It's not something everyone needs to read. But I don't think there's anything quite like it on the market. If you need what it offers, you'll be glad to have it on your shelf.

(Thanks to the students in Houghton College's spring philosophy colloquium—Anna Judd, Aaron Moore, Anna Nesemeier, Tyler Stetson, Elijah Tangenberg, Honus Wagner, and Josiah Wiedenheft—for reading and discussing Jeffrey's book, and a draft of this review, with me. Thanks to Kyla Ebels-Duggan for helpful discussion about her argument in "The Right, the Good, and the Threat of Despair.")

*Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment*, by John Pittard. Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp xiii + 339. \$80 (hardcover).

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John Pittard's book, *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment* marks a significant contribution to both epistemology and the philosophy of religion. The book is excellent and those working in these fields would do well to engage with it. The problem Pittard addresses is that of religious disagreement: Suppose Sally believes some religious proposition, say, that



*God exists*. Let's call this proposition *p*. Further suppose that Sally becomes aware that an epistemic peer, Bill, disagrees with her and believes *not-p*. According to Pittard, we can say that "two people qualify as epistemic peers with respect to *p* just in case their epistemic credentials with respect to *p* are equally strong" (25). What is the epistemic significance of the disagreement between Sally and Bill? Does peer disagreement constitute a (partial) defeater for each of their respective beliefs?

Non-conciliationists say that Sally is justified in remaining steadfast in the face of disagreement. Conciliationists, on the other hand, recommend that Sally revise her religious belief *p* in the face of disagreement. Strong conciliationists say that Sally must lower her confidence in *p* *below whatever threshold is required for rational belief*. Of course, if strong conciliationism is true, then given the existence of widespread religious disagreement, a serious sceptical challenge to religious belief is on offer. Pittard defends what he refers to as weak conciliationism. This position recommends belief revision in certain cases of disagreement, but not in others. We might think of Pittard's view as a hybrid between strong non-conciliationism, which recommends never revising, and strong conciliationism, which has opponents always revise. To my mind Pittard offers us the most plausible hybrid theory currently found in the epistemology of disagreement.

In Chapter One Pittard carefully outlines the challenge to the rationality of religious belief posed by the existence of peer disagreement. Of course, one way for Sally to evade this argument is to show that she is more reliable with respect to *p* than her opponent Bill. While Pittard thinks Sally needs good internal reasons for believing this she also needs good *agent-neutral internal reasons* (the "Agent Impartiality Constraint"), and good *dispute independent agent-neutral internal reasons* (the "Reasons Impartiality Constraint") (46).

In Chapter Two Pittard takes on the Reasons Impartiality Constraint. His two foils are David Christensen and J.L. Schellenberg. Christensen is the foremost defender of the idea that Sally must have *dispute-independent* reasons for thinking she is more reliable about *p* than Bill. I won't outline what Pittard says about Christensen and independence, though conciliationists would do well to reflect on this section. Schellenberg writes in the context of inquiry, addressing which sort of doxastic practices inquirers should place their presumptive trust in. According to Schellenberg mystical experiences are not one such practice. Schellenberg advocates for *doxastic minimalism* according to which "the only practices that should be treated as "innocent until proven guilty" are those that are both *universal* among human beings (or at least nearly so) and *unavoidable*. Any other doxastic practice must be shown to be reliable before it is rational to rely on it" (72). We also need to grant a presumptive trust to these practices in order to avoid widespread scepticism. Of course, the doxastic practices that someone like Sally uses to form her religious beliefs are neither

universal nor unavoidable. She also doesn't need to rely on these practices to avoid scepticism.

One criticism that Pittard levels against Schellenberg's argument is that it focuses exclusively on avoiding error but not on arriving at the truth. It is well known that William James argued that inquirers often have to balance the two sometimes conflicting goals of avoiding error and gaining truth (82). Pittard says that "it should not be assumed that the investigator who is concerned for the truth will remain agnostic on some question any-time the evidence is less than fully conclusive" (83). According to Pittard if someone values the truth then she is perfectly entitled to use non-basic doxastic practices (even though this increases the possibility of error). According to Pittard "[i]n holding that the committed investigator will (as far as possible) be a doxastic minimalist, Schellenberg presupposes without argument that the aim of error avoidance always trumps the aim of believing the truth" (83).

It's not clear to me why Pittard claims Schellenberg's doxastic minimalism does not care about gaining true beliefs. It seems to me that it actually perfectly balances the two competing epistemic goals in question. The doxastic practices that are granted a presumptive trust are, after all, *used to gain true beliefs*. Pittard seems to think Schellenberg's account is too narrow and restrictive. But in arguing for a more permissive stance toward non-basic doxastic practices Pittard risks being overly permissive. His objective, of course, is to show that religious experience (and doxastic religious practises in general) are trustworthy and hence dispute-independent reasons aren't required as a legitimate tiebreaker in religious disputes. But he never tells us where to draw the line. Ingesting a large quantity of a hallucinogenic drug is a doxastic practice. It will in all likelihood cause the user to form a number of different beliefs. But this isn't a reliable doxastic practice. Schellenberg's account tells us why this is so, while Pittard's criticisms leaves the reader wondering.

So in Chapters One and Two Pittard explains the problem of disagreement and challenges some of the assumptions he thinks are required for strong conciliationism to succeed. But what is Pittard's own view about how we should respond to disagreement? In Chapters Three, Four, and Five he defends his own weak conciliatory position. These are the three most important chapters of the book and they mark a significant contribution to the current literature on disagreement. Suppose Sally and Bill each possess different thermometers that are typically (and indeed equally) reliable. But one day Sally's thermometer reads 20 degrees and Bill's reads 17 degrees. In such a scenario there is no principled reason to trust one of the thermometers over the other. This picture is meant to support a particularly strong conciliatory view known as the *equal weight view*. Sally and Bill should give equal weight to each of the readouts and in this case they should probably suspend judgment altogether (95). Of course, proponents of the equal weight view will say that with respect to

their religious dispute, the respective judgments of Sally and Bill should each be understood as different readouts on a thermometer. If this analogy holds, then the equal weight view applies in religious disputes like the one between Sally and Bill.

I must pause to say that while Pittard nicely motivates the equal weight view by explaining the position of those who motivate it with thermometer analogies it's somewhat glaring he never mentions the work of Jonathan Matheson. This is because Matheson has extensively defended the equal weight view in a series of articles, but more importantly Matheson is the only one who offers a book-length defense of it in his *The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015). Matheson uses the idea of an epistemic election rather than thermometer to motivate his version of the equal weight view. Even if interacting with Matheson's view would not ultimately change Pittard's discussion, he should explain this to the reader. Otherwise we're left wondering why Matheson is missing from the discussion.

Pittard notes that the initial credence or confidence that Sally places in her religious belief must be accurate in order for her to accurately conditionalize on Bill's opposing belief (99). He argues "that instrumentalism [i.e. treating beliefs as thermometers' readings] (together with conditionalization) rationalizes demanding conciliatory requirements in superficial but not in fundamental disagreement" (101). I must admit, I was quite sceptical at this point about the prospects of Pittard being able to distinguish between superficial and fundamental disagreements (at least in a principled way). However, I'm glad to say that Pittard more than satisfies my initial scepticism.

The degree to which someone like Sally should trust her cognitive faculties depends on (1) her assessment of cognitive reliability, but also (2) her prior credence in the proposition in question (102). Pittard is right that this second condition is simply left out of current discussions and he's also right that it matters quite a lot. He says that Sally has "more reason to trust readouts that support a proposition that is antecedently probable than readouts that support a proposition that is antecedently improbable" (102). He explains:

The equal weight view is often described as requiring one to "split the difference" with epistemic peers by adopting a credence halfway between the two predisagreement credences. But splitting the difference generally does *not* accord with how epistemic peers treat discrepancies between equally reliable instruments. Splitting the difference in a peer disagreement is a reasonable response that accords with instrumentalism only in the special circumstances where one's prior credence distribution favors neither one's own view nor the view of one's peer (105).

It's true that this could simply be a friendly amendment to the equal weight view. Maybe Sally and Bill should also give equal weight to each of their prior credences (106). But Pittard contends that:

[T]here are some attitudes that cannot be treated in an instrumentalist way *at all*. In particular, I am unable to adopt an instrumentalist view of my most fundamental rational starting points. Adopting an instrumentalist attitude toward some doxastic attitude or inclination involves treating that attitude or inclination as a “readout” of a complicated instrument and then conditionalizing on that readout evidence from an antecedent perspective *that is not itself informed by the readout*. So this process requires that I have some antecedent perspective that is not informed by the very readout being treated instrumentally. But if the “readout” in question is my most fundamental attitude regarding the plausibility of  $p$ , what Bayesians sometimes refer to as my “ur-prior” for  $p$ , then clearly I have no perspective on  $p$  that is antecedent to the readout (108).

While this may not pose a problem for thermometers when there’s always a clear prior credence, when it comes to the instruments of our heads things are much less clear (108). For some of the readouts are themselves antecedent expectations and hence instrumentalism doesn’t apply to our most fundamental attitudes (108). Pittard explains that “if I disagree with you about the *fundamental* plausibility of  $p$ , so that we have two different ur-priors for  $p$ , I cannot treat both of these ur-priors in a purely instrumentalist way” (109). One’s ur-priors cannot always be judged *independently* of disputes about them (as strong conciliationism demands) (111). The weak conciliationism Pittard defends just requires *conditionalizing on outputs* (not the antecedent priors) and hence in certain cases the type of revision required will be much less demanding than strong conciliationism.

An absolutely brilliant part of Pittard’s view here is that he can explain the intuitive results that we should revise in very simple cases: imagine Sally and Bill just disagree about how much each of them owe on a restaurant bill when they’ve both done the calculation in their heads. If Sally and Bill are equally reliable about mental math, then their ur-priors should be identical (neither has a reason to favour their own). Pittard’s distinction between antecedent priors and the outputs (i.e. the thermometer reading) genuinely gets the right result in these simple cases without necessarily committing him to revision in more complicated cases (i.e., cases of religious disagreement). That Pittard gets the right results here (in a principled way) is part of the reason why I think he has offered the most successful hybrid theory to date. I really hope that epistemologists explore Pittard’s work in this part of the book.

Of course, at this point we still don’t have a solution to religious disagreement. However, Pittard explains that “a substantial portion of one’s ur-priors may enjoy some degree of partisan justification” (118). Partisan justification amounts to reasons that any neutral third-party would accept. The question, then, is whether someone like Sally can have partisan justification about her religious beliefs. Pittard’s preferred account of partisan justification says that it “is grounded in rational insight and is not available in disagreements with acknowledged rationality parity”

(141–142). Pittard also says that “according to a rationalist account of partisan justification, a self-favoring (readout) reliability estimate can be justified in virtue of having rational insight into the truth or plausibility of one’s outlook” (168). Finally, he also explains that “for insight to ground partisan justification, that insight must help supply an all-things-considered reason for thinking that one’s own outlook is rationally stronger than the outlooks of one’s disputants” (168). So now the question is whether someone like Sally could have the right kind of religious insight that’s required on this account.

Pittard ultimately labels his position *rationalist weak conciliationism* which says that “confident religious belief is likely [to] be justified only to the extent that one has insight that justifies thinking that one’s own religious outlook is rationally stronger (in a way that one can discern) than the outlook of one’s disputants” (183). Pittard is not just endorsing a type of rationalism that only the sophisticated religious believer can possess. He endorses a type of *affective rationalism* such that emotional experiences can contribute to genuine religious insight (182). Pittard does not claim that *every* apparent religious insight is in fact genuine. He also doesn’t claim that revision is *never* required in cases of religious disagreement. The key is that if Sally’s ur-prior about  $p$  is based on a genuine religious insight then she needs to revise her belief that  $p$  by conditionalizing on Bill’s belief *but also on her ur-prior*. While sometimes this will still require significant revision at the level of the religious belief (i.e., the output), other times it won’t. If Sally’s ur-prior is higher than Bill’s ur-prior, the type of revision she is required to make will be significantly less than that typically required by the equal weight view. We now have a partial solution to religious disagreement which is precisely what Pittard promises us. Chapters Six and Seven discuss the implications of religious disagreement if it turns out that Pittard’s rational weak conciliationism is mistaken. This is a nice feature of the book as it will engage with readers who haven’t necessarily bought what Pittard has been selling.

Given space constraints this review is, sadly, much less fine-grained than what is found in the book. I close by noting that Pittard is a sensitive philosopher. By this I mean that he is sensitive to not only the demerits of views that oppose his own, but also the merits of them. Likewise, he’s sensitive about the scope of his own views and never tries to overreach in his conclusions. To say that this is a book in religious epistemology is slightly misleading. For this book is, I think, required reading for any epistemologist working on disagreement. Likewise, given the sceptical threat to religious belief posed by conciliationism I also think that this book is required reading for the philosopher of religion. To genuinely engage two subdisciplines in philosophy in one unified project is an impressive feat in itself. My sense is that *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment* is just the beginning for Pittard. I highly recommend it and I look forward to reading more of his work.